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Muslim Militants Share Afghan Link

By CHRIS HEDGES,

CAIRO, March 27— One year after Muslim rebels ousted the Communist Government in Afghanistan, the long Afghanistan war reverberates throughout the Islamic world as veterans of the conflict take up arms to try to topple governments in Algeria, Egypt and other Arab countries.

Indeed, Mahmud Abohalima, one of the men accused of involvement in the World Trade Center bombing in New York, is said to have gone to Afghanistan to fight with antigovernment rebels for months at a time.

The Egyptian cleric, Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, whose preaching attracted several of the Trade Center suspects, also spent time in Peshawar, Pakistan, the rebel base of operations during the war. Afghanistan Is a Base

Western diplomats and Arab officials say thousands of Islamic militants engaging in clandestine, violent campaigns to overthrow governments in Algeria, Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia, Jordan, Turkey and other predominantly Muslim states currently use Afghanistan as a base.

One irony of this fact, specialists in Middle Eastern affairs say, is that the Afghan mujahedeen -- as the the Afghan rebels are known -- for many years received billions of dollars of clandestine aid from the United States and Saudi Arabia, who were eager to enlist Islamic groups in the cause of fighting a pro-Moscow Government in Kabul. The effort culminated last April in the overthrow of the Government of President Najibullah, although the victorious rebel groups have spent much of the time since then fighting among themselves.

"Weapons outlast the conflicts they were intended for," said Barnett R. Rubin, an associate professor of political science at Columbia University and a specialist on Afghanistan. "In the process of supporting a worthy cause, the Afghan resistance to Soviet invasion, we and our partners have ended up infusing both arms and trained combatants into one of the most unstable areas in the world."

During the days of the Afghan war, Mr. Abdel Rahman was involved in recruiting young Egyptians and raising money for the Afghan insurgents in Egypt, and he is reported by associates to have been in Peshawar, the Pakistani base for the Afghan rebels, in 1988 and for several months in 1990. Sheik's Followers Are There

Many of the sheik's followers are still based there, or in Afghanistan. Mr. Abdul Rahman also has two sons who are based in Afghanistan and who are veterans of the Afghan conflict, said family members interviewed in Fayoum, Egypt.

In addition, one of the latest communiques from the Islamic Group, the militant organization that has taken responsibility for attacks on tourists in Egypt, was sent to international news agencies from Peshawar.

It is not clear which of the many Afghan rebel groups received help from Arabs or Arab units and thus may have played a role in training future militants in their home countries. Many of the Afghan guerrilla organizations have been little more than local militias, and the groups have had a variety of ideologies and loyalties.

Mr. Abdel Rahman is said by some specialists to have close ties with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the leader of a militant Afghan Islamic faction that has often fought other more moderate groups of Afghan mujahedeen. Expelled From Pakistan

Pakistani officials, in an attempt to curb the influence of the Afghan groups, closed down many of their offices in Peshawar last year and expelled large numbers of the fighters. The veterans are returning to their countries of origin, some by way of Iran and the Sudan. About 2,000 others have moved into Afghanistan, where they run two training camps, Arab officials say.

A senior Egyptian official said that the recent return of some 800 Egyptians who fought in the Afghan war had "radically transformed" the antigovernment activists by making them more Islamic and skilled at insurgent tactics.

"These men know how to set up an ambush or plant a car bomb," said the official. "They are committed to this radical ideology of political Islam, and they have turned their energies and skills against the rest of us."

The United States-Saudi effort to aid the Afghan rebels started shortly after the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan at Christmastime in 1979, and it grew during the Reagan Administration years.

At the height of the Afghan war, Moslem fighters from other countries numbered no more than 4,000 guerrillas, compared with 200,000 full-time Afghan fighters. But 15,000 to 25,000 of these outsiders fought for varying lengths of time in Afghanistan. Stinger Missiles in Iran

Another byproduct of the Afghan war has been a tremendous spread of weapons throughout the region. Stinger antiaircraft missiles, supplied to the rebels in the 1980's, have found their way to Iran and the Government of Qatar. And weapons from Afghanistan are now being sold to groups in the Central Asian republics, India, Pakistan and the Middle East, Western diplomats say.

Most Western diplomats caution that the rise of the Islamic movement in the Arab world would exist with or without the veterans. What worries these diplomats is that the Afghan war veterans

may be making the antigovernment activities more violent.

The United States put an estimated \$3.3 billion into the rebel army, and the Government of Saudi Arabia usually matched American financial contributions.

But the fighters from outside rarely mixed with Afghan units, setting up separate encampments, conducting their own prayers and fighting in separate units. The Arab legions were often composed of zealous troops, neither shrinking from fierce combat nor, their critics contend, from killing those they captured. Known as Brutal Fighters

"They gained a reputation as some of the most brutal fighters in the war, and they deserved it," said Anthony G. Hyman, a senior fellow at the Social Research Council in New York and a specialist in Afghanistan. "They kept themselves apart from the Afghans and were disliked for it. They regarded themselves as superior."

"The call to fight in Afghanistan enthused and ignited many poor young men," said the Foreign Minister of Yemen, Dr. Abdul Kareem Al-Iryani, in an interview in his office in Sana. "But the conflict quickly became fertile ground for extremism to grow."

The havoc caused by the veterans is most evident in Algeria, which canceled a second round of elections a year ago after it became apparent that Islamic militants would gain control of the Government.

The Algerian police are engaged in daily gun battles with about 700 well-armed Algerian veterans, known colloquially as "the Afghans," and hundreds of their supporters.

Yemeni officials contend that Afghanistan veterans in Yemen, financed by Osama Binladen, a wealthy Saudi militant and former Afghan guerrilla now living in Khartoum, Sudan, have been behind a series of attacks, including two bombs in Aden hotels last year that killed an Australian tourist.

Egypt is also plagued by groups of veterans who, when cornered by security forces in safe houses in Cairo or in their strongholds in southern Egypt, often engage in gun battles that last for several hours. ----- ALGERIA BREAKS TIES WITH IRAN

ALGIERS, March 27 (AP) -- Algeria announced today that it had severed diplomatic relations with Iran and recalled its Ambassador from the Sudan, accusing both nations of backing Muslim fundamentalists battling the Government. The governing High State Council said in a communique that Iran and the Sudan backed "terrorism."

Photo: Yemeni officials contend that Osama Binladen, a wealthy Saudi militant and former Afghan guerrilla, financed several attacks including two bombs in Aden hotels last year that killed an Australian tourist. (1988) Map showing Algeria, Egypt, Turkey, Yemen, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

